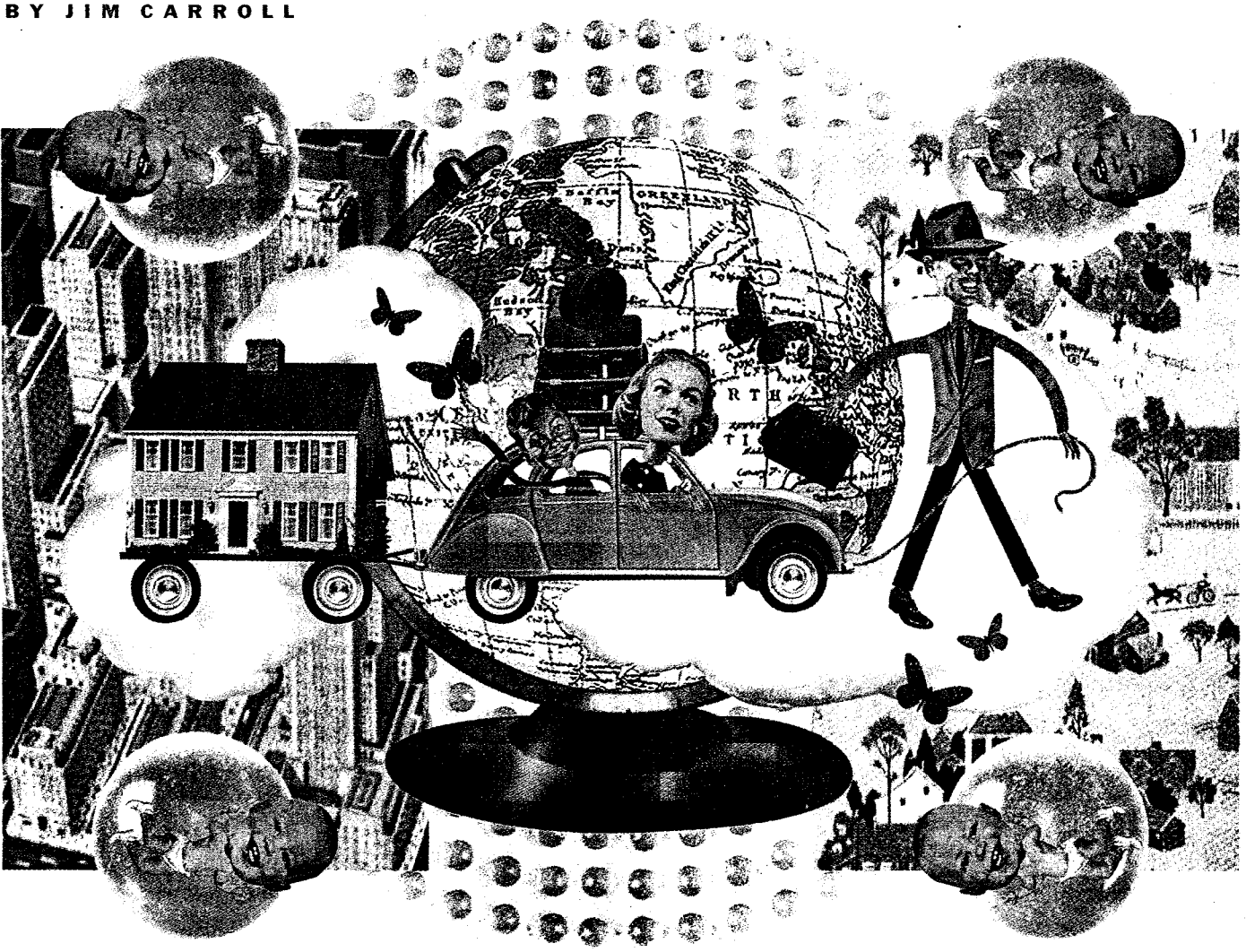
BY JIM CARROLL



City living

BIG CITIES STILL GET THE PRESS, BUT THESE DAYS SMALLER ONES GET THE PEOPLE

A milestone was passed this July 17, at exactly 8:45 p.m. (EST). According to the magazine *American Demographics*, that was the moment the world's population crossed the 6-billion mark.

The majority of these new arrivals will live in mid-sized cities – that is, cities with a population of 500,000 to 5 million people. While megacities such as New York, Tokyo, London ▸

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and Bangkok get all the attention and press coverage, it is places like Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Fresno, California and Cairns, Queensland that are getting all the people.

YESTERDAY

The facts are many and astonishing when you deal with the topic of the earth's population. Even the multiples of one single fact will take you aback. Think about this: 145 babies are born every minute, which means 8,700 an hour, or 76 million a year.

Those babies are part of a trend that has long been called the "population explosion." And with good reason. It took more than 1,300 years for the world's population to double the total that it had reached in 200 BC. Yet it took just an additional 600 years for it to double once again. The next doubling took only 150 years; the next, 100 years; and the most recent, 50 years.

TODAY

Most of today's new arrivals will join a human population that is now firmly rooted in cities. In 1900, only 160 million people lived in cities, representing just 10 per cent of the total global population. But experts predict that by 2006, half of the projected global population will live in cities. Fascinating, when you consider that the world's cities cover a mere 2 per cent of the earth's surface.

Some cities are huge, and their impact on world patterns is equally huge. By the end of the century, some 14 per cent of the earth's total population will live in just 37 megacities (such as Manila, Tokyo and Los Angeles). Where are all the other urbanites? In smaller centres, of course, the ones with populations of less than 5 million. Yet, though smaller than their mega-cousins, these cities are steadily growing in popularity. Expect this trend to continue well into the new millennium.

TOMORROW

The United Nations expects population growth to continue until at least 2200, when it will stabilize at some 11.6 billion people, with the majority living in urban areas. However, the desire to live in the largest cities will diminish, as people assess the associated crime levels, infrastructure problems and other challenges and perils. As this happens, small and mid-sized cities will come into their own.

Although the largest Canadian cities are only mid-sized by world definitions, we will experience the same general trend, on our own scale. We will continue to see growth in our largest population centres, such as Vancouver and

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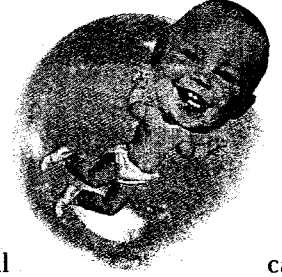

Toronto, but we will see even more growth in our smaller-sized cities.

One phenomenon that will drive this trend is the retirement of the baby boomer. The number of senior citizens in Canada is set to double in the next 30 years. Many business analysts believe that the thriving stock market is fuelled in part by the huge retirement-oriented investments being made by those boomers, currently in their prime earning years. What will they do with that money when they retire? Among other things, it seems, they will use it to move to a smaller city.

Victoria, BC, has already earned a reputation as a retirement community. Expect a similar upswing in the likes of Halifax, Edmonton and Kingston as new retirees choose to leave the big cities where they made their money, and retire to a place that promises them a slower pace of life while still offering some big-city amenities.

Another factor in the population shift: Internet and telecommunications technologies, which combine to make physical location less and less of a factor in choosing where to work and play. This has important consequences for smaller cities and rural communities. Moncton has enjoyed a boom as companies base their telecommunication-related businesses there, drawn by the city's excellent high-tech infrastructure. In the US, some of the fastest growing areas of California and Utah are also some of the most remote, geographically speaking – but they all boast wired communities with outstanding infrastructure. These places are being populated by "lone eagles" – folks who move to these remote areas in order to take advantage of their beautiful mountains, clear lakes, fresh air, wonderful rural amenities and fast Internet connections. Plugged into a plethora of high-tech devices, they can communicate with the rest of the business world via e-mail, fax machine, cell phone and a raft of other technologies.

These two trends – aging boomers and new technologies – mean that we will see continued strong growth in smaller cities. Sudbury, Ontario, and Clarenville, Newfoundland, understand the trend. That's why they are working so hard to establish the infrastructure that will turn them into "smart communities" – ones that offer high-tech connectivity to the world.

The fact is, cities will continue to thrive. It's just that the megacities will have to share the spotlight with their smaller counterparts. ■

Jim Carroll, C.A., examines our wired world through speaking engagements, a weekly *Globe and Mail* column and his new book, *Y2K Planning for Canadians*. Reach him at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com.

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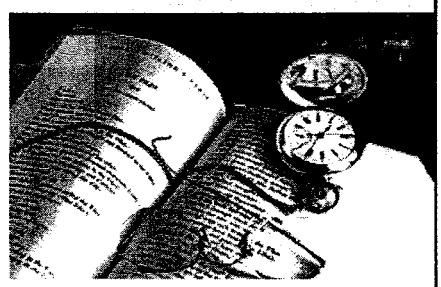

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